

# Carving a COOL NICHE in ENTERTAINING

BY DIANNA STAMPFLER



being described “cold as ice” is a compliment for Randy Finch and Derek Maxfield, owners of Ice Sculptures Ltd., in Grand Rapids – and stars of the Food Network’s show *Ice Brigade*. The two proudly wield chainsaws, picks, saws and other household tools to carve up intricate works of art displayed at weddings, corporate outings, charity functions, community festivals and basically any other venue or event where there’s an audience.

These two former culinary students met while serving as apprentices at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. Both say they were drawn to the culinary arts to fulfill their love of science and art, but it didn’t take long for them to find that ice sculpting was their true calling. They worked full-time as chefs for years, honing their sculpting skills and chiseling out a path to their future, one block of ice at a time.

In 1994, they invested everything they had – passion, time and very little money – to open their own business on the southern end of

downtown Grand Rapids. During those early years, Randy says, they would “drive to a hotel or banquet hall, open up the trunk filled with tools and sculpt a block of ice right on location.”

Ten years after starting their business, Derek and Randy added another notch in their tool belt – authoring *Ice Sculpting the Modern Way* (Delmar Learning, 2004) with Robert Garlough, adjunct instructor at the Secchia Institute for Culinary Education at Grand Rapids Community College. The manual is now used around the world to teach ice sculpting tips and techniques.

Along with their artistic nature, Randy and Derek are also competitive characters. In 2009, they placed among the “Top 25” in ArtPrize – the world’s largest art contest held each fall in Grand Rapids. In 2009, they coached the ice sculptor on the U.S. Pastry team that won “Best Ice Sculpture” in the Coupe du Monde de la Patisserie in Lyon, France. They’re coaching the sculptor for the 2012 competition as well.

Derek and Randy continue to push the frozen envelope every chance they get, taking the ice world by storm. They were among the first in their industry to fully incorporate computerized technology (commonly known as an “ice carving robot”) into their operational methods. The duo is widely-recognized for its out-of-this-world sculptures which have been featured at movie premieres, galas, concerts and sporting events.

Over the past 17-plus years, the company has thrived, and during the busy season has more than 10 employees. Their outgoing personalities, melded with their unparalleled techniques resulting in elaborate and interactive displays, captured the attention of producers at the Food Network.

Last winter, Randy and Derek – along with their crew – traveled around the state of Michigan with full camera and production teams, carving up an impressive menu of intense sculptures unlike anything anyone had ever seen before. Randy says he insisted the show retain its ties to Michigan, keeping all episodes deeply rooted in the mitten.

“Grand Rapids is part of who we are,” Randy says.

After filming wrapped, it took just a few months for production to pull the *Ice Brigade* series together. Then, Randy and Derek were flown around the country to promote the new reality/drama/cooking program on various talk shows.

Most notable was an appearance on NBC with Kathie Lee Gifford and Hoda Kotb. With a crowd gathered on the plaza, Randy and Derek unveiled a working pool table, emblazoned with The Today Show logo. Armed with a circular sander, Randy also polished off an ice sculpture of the two hosts as Hoda stood and watched in awe (Kathie Lee, a vocal supporter of West Michigan, unfortunately was not on the show that day).

The seven-episode primetime show, *Ice Brigade*, premiered in March 2011. Broadcast to millions of viewers worldwide, the show drew a loyal following from those around the state and beyond. Viewing parties were held each week in downtown Grand Rapids, where as many as 100 fans – often with members of the cast – gathered to watch and cheer.

During the inaugural show, the ice team was challenged with creating the Midwest’s first “ice lounge” – complete with a bar, seating areas, pool table, entertainment center and beverage glasses – for Sangria restaurant in Royal Oak. The icy 600-square-foot bar was added onto the Sky Club above the restaurant and was a hot spot for cool fun.

That first episode also featured a beautiful rotating punch bowl for Michigan-native and former Los Angeles Laker Magic Johnson, for his mother’s birthday party in Lansing.

Later in the season, the team crafted a working baby grand piano for the Kalamazoo Radisson. Even American Idol star and Kalamazoo native Matt Giraud made a special guest appearance to tickle the faux-ivories during the community’s Art Hop celebration.

The Eastown Hookah Lounge in Grand Rapids commissioned a working six-foot-tall hookah pipe, which the team sculpted to resemble the caterpillar from *Alice in Wonderland*.

A gaming setup, consisting of craps, blackjack and roulette tables – complete with poker chips and dice made out of ice, were unveiled at Turtle Creek Casino near Traverse City.

At the annual Hunter Ice Festival in Niles, a carousel carved entirely out of ice was a highlight for children and adults. A “Rube Goldberg-inspired” putt-putt hole was the highlight of the Rockford Ice Festival. Spinning turntables were part of an ice DJ booth. Other creations

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included an ice bowling alley, pin-ball machine and mechanical bull.

On the night of the season finale, a full-blown party was held at the JW Marriott under the title "Spring Bling," with more than 300 in attendance. That episode showcased an ice chess board with larger-than-life-size pieces created at Rosa Parks Circle in downtown Grand Rapids.

The episode also featured a season-ending prank in which the team switched out the furniture in the office of Gerhard Schmied, Director of Food & Beverage for the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel, with ice furniture – desk, chair, shelves and accessories.

So where do they go from here? The Food Network has until late March 2012 to renew Ice Brigade for a second season. The show also has the potential to be picked up by one of the other networks owned by Scripps Howard. As for Ice Sculptures, Ltd., Randy and Derek are going strong with both private and corporate business.

"Each day, we're bombarded with thousands and thousands of branding messages," says Randy. "We have a unique product which can take corporate branding to the next level. It's not necessarily the sculpture itself, it's the atmosphere, the novelty and sense of wonder that it creates, that draws people in and sparks conversation."

How often do people stop by a trade show booth to take a picture with a company banner? Not often, Randy says. But they will stop and take pictures of themselves next to an ice sculpture. Then, they'll tweet that photo or post it on Facebook, where friends and colleagues will see it, share it, retweet it and send it viral and thus creating the ultimate in "word of mouth" marketing.

Of course, there's also the "entertainment" element of hiring a master carver to transform a giant block of ice into a piece of art on site. It's just like bringing in a juggler, magician, clown, comedian or musician, only refreshing and mesmerizing.

"That's the impact we provide for businesses looking to stand out from the crowd," Randy says. "Our interactive pieces take crowd-pleasing to a whole new plateau. It inspires people to dream of new possibilities, recharges their creativity and creates a memorable experience." □

For more about the Ice Guru team, log onto IceGuru.com.



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